

"DOWN THE UP-STAIRCASE"

For over a thousand years, the sidrot or weekly Torah portions have been known by their present names with only minor changes. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe*, these titles are "Torah names," headings to which the Torah gives special significance, for they somehow reveal the inner essence of the whole of the sidra.

So, this week's portion is called Lekh-Lekha, which means, "Get thee out," be active and move. Literally, the idiom means, "go to yourself," return to your spiritual identity, climb up the ladder to spiritual heights, reach your own soul in your ascent. A Jew must never be static. He must be dynamic and progressive in his Avodat Hashem, in his service of the Lord, in moving himself and history in the direction of God. This, then, is the essence of all that is related in this week's sidra. Thus, we read today of how Abraham goes to the Land of Israel. He is not traveling as a sight-seeing tourist with first-class accommodations. His journey is a symbolic conquest. As Ramban points out, וינסע אברהם, Abraham's journeys in Canaan, prefigured the Jewish possession of the Land by ויבנה, by actual possession when he staked out the territory. All of this is part of Abraham's "going," his Lekh-Lekha.

However, there are several important incidents which spell not progress but decline. The foremost failure or set-back is the verse: ויהי נדב ונרדא בארץ מצרים, "And there was famine in land and Abram went down to Egypt." This is not merely an incidental

*In his discourse on Lekh-Lekha, לעך לעך, 5731.

decision to change residence. Psychologically, it was a major crisis for Abraham. He had left Canaan with the divine promise "I shall make you into a great nation and I shall bless you." Some blessing! He had just come to Canaan, and instead of bringing with him posterity, he had become the harbinger of hunger, and he was already fleeing the land. What a disappointment -- history's first ^{הסוף} had become history's first ^{תחילת}!

Religiously, too, Abram's descent to Egypt was frustrating, almost abortive of his whole mission. His journey to Canaan was meant to be a kiddush hashem, an act of sanctifying the Divine Name by making the One God available and accessible to humans. The Midrash compares the situation to an open box of incense. If it stands in a corner, no one can smell it and it is of no use. But if you take it and move it about in the middle of the room, then your motion causes the odor to be wafted and to benefit all who are present. So, God said to Abram:

וְהָיָה שְׁמִי גָדוֹל בְּעוֹלָם
וְהָיָה שְׁמִי גָדוֹל בְּעוֹלָם

"Move yourself from place to place in Canaan, and thus will your name be made great in the world" -- and through your reputation will the divine Name be sanctified and the divine message be known. The journey to Canaan was to be the launching of Abraham's religious career. However, if ^{הוא}, if Abraham "went down" to Egypt, that cancelled out his mission and vitiated his message.

Domestically, this descent to Egypt was the cause of many troubles for Abraham. For it is here, in Egypt that there took place the abduction of Sarah: ^{וְהִנָּחַלְתָּהּ}, she was kidnapped and taken into the harem of Pharaoh. So our sidra relates troubles as well as

triumphs.

And, spiritually and historically as well, we are faced with problems in this sidra. We know the principle that our Rabbis laid down: אבותינו, the deeds of the fathers are the symbol of the recurring patterns in the lives of their children. But some Jewish teachers, especially Hasidim, taught that this does not mean only that the lives of the Patriarchs were symbolic of the historic patterns of their descendants, but that the Patriarchs actually participated in the history that came after them, that their actions were the commencement of Jewish history. Therefore, אברהם ירד מצרים means not only that Abraham's descent to Egypt was a historic symbol of the later Egyptian exile, but that it was in some way itself the beginning of that terrible and bitter exile.

But if that is the case, and such were the blows suffered by Abraham and Sarah, how can we account for the name Lekh-Lekha, which indicates progress and growth and advancement?

The answer provided for us by the Lubavitcher Rebbe is, in essence, this: ירידה לצורך עלייה, sometimes descent is for the purpose of ascent, often you must go down in order to go up to an even higher level than that at which you began. Some failures are merely temporary, they are the future success in disguise. Sometimes the set-back is instrumental to later success. Often you must retreat in order to move on, in which case the retreat is preparatory and part of progress and advance.

Therefore we read in today's sidra אברהם ירד מצרים, Abraham's going down to Egypt, led to and was part of אברהם ירד מצרים, that Abraham went up again from Egypt. His going down was part and for

the purpose of his later going up.

Even Sarah's abduction to the harem of Pharoah served such a function. One of the great Hasidic teachers has taught us that her chaste conduct in the court of Pharoah was so exemplary that it became the model and guarantee of Jewish conduct through the centuries of exile in foreign lands. The descendants of Sarah, inspired by her model, refused to assimilate, they did not permit the purity of their faith^{to} be defiled, they protected the honor of their emunah in God.

And so it is with the redemption from Egypt. Bad as the exile was, the positive values of the redemption were even greater. The Torah tells us that when the Israelites left Egypt, they took with them ^{הון ורכוש}, great wealth. Our Kabbalistic tradition maintains that his wealth was not only or even primarily material, but that it was spiritual: they took out from Egypt the ^{נרצות הקדושות}, "the lost sparks of sanctity" embedded in Egyptian culture. By this they meant to say, that despite the corruption of Egypt, there were some values which one might consider divine, some aspects that had enduring value, and that these "sparks" were not condemned to destruction with Egypt. They were redeemed by Israel who learned them from the Egyptians and, by taking them along with them, preserved them forever.

So ^{ירידה} is part of ^{אליה}; the descent leading to the ascent is all part of Lekh-Lekhah, of general progress. ^{ירידה לצורך עליה}. Or, to use a metaphor more known to us from the popular literature of recent years, sometimes you go down, but it is only going "down the up-staircase":^ו your decline is merely a part of the procedure of ultimate ascent.

So it is with our national life. Joseph was sold by his brothers

into slavery. All the brothers later, and Joseph at the time, thought that this event was an unmitigated disaster. But, as Joseph later told them when he revealed his identity to them, כִּי אֶמְצֵא אֶתְכֶם, all the agony of my slavery was part of the divine plan to save the entire family now. He went down -- but it was on the up-staircase, which led even higher.

Or, to take a more recent case: In 1947, Prime Minister Bevin of England refused to issue 100,000 visas to Jewish refugees languishing in camps in Eruope and Cyprus. How grief-stricken we all were! We were facing a blank wall. Yet, we now appreciate that had he issued these visas, the pressure ~~f~~^eor independence would have been severely reduced, and perhaps a million or two million other Jewish immigrants would never be living today in the State of Israel. It was יִי' -- אֵל.

The same is true with the State of Israel today. Often we are plunged into a gray mood when we consider our international and even internal situation. The constant attrition, the state of no-war-no-peace, the ever impending threat of greater warfare involving the Great Powers, the increasing isolation of Israel from neutrals and friends -- all this is not calculated to encourage great cheer on behalf of those who love Israel. Nevertheless, we must never permit ourselves to lose our sense of balance. We are only humans, and therefore our prespectives are limited. Even we, in our present situation, can begin to appreciate that quite possibly our present situation is the best of all, that the alternatives may be far worse, that what is happening at the present may be propaedeutic to something much greater, much nobler, much happier. Our present יִי' may

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am, told him when his star began to fail:
אם אצנך היהלום אשר החילול אפסו
לא מול לו י אפסו חפסו אפסו.

כ"ח

8.15

cf.

So, Lekh-Lekha, both by content and name, leaves us with this encouraging message: if we suffer, whether it be illness, financial reverses, any form of domestic misery or loneliness or frustration, remember that *י"י צוה ל'סלח ל'ם*. I do not mean that things will always get better; but they usually do, little as we expect it. Let us then not despair. Let each of us, in his own situation, bear this in mind -- not as a palliative or peace-of-mind preachment, but as part of emunah, part of Jewish faith.

Then it will be true of us, as it was said of Abraham in today's

sidra: אֱמֵן אֱלֹהֵינוּ, which we translate as: "And he (Abraham) believed in the Lord, and He accounted to him as righteousness." But this is meant that God considered Abraham's faith as a special act of righteousness. But the word אֱמֵן derives from the word meaning "justice." We might therefore translate that as: "And Abraham believed in the Lord, and God accredited it to him and justified his faith."

When we will have emunah or faith that the downturn is part of an up-going, that אֱמֵן, and that faith will prove אֱמֵן, our confidence will be vindicated and justified, and indeed אֱמֵן.

The call of Lekh-Lekha, of climbing ever higher, will be ours to achieve.